

# Architect of the House of Labor: Peter James McGuire

BY L.A. O'DONNELL

The name of Peter J. McGuire (1852–1906) has receded into the mists of time, yet his contribution to building a trade union movement in America equals that of Samuel Gompers, a contemporary of his, and that of John L. Lewis of a later generation.

There is little doubt that McGuire was a prime mover of the Labor Day holiday, though others were involved as well. While McGuire was not a lone advocate of the idea, he was its most articulate champion—a gifted public speaker. He spoke enthusiastically in favor of such a celebration at the meeting of the Central Labor Union in Clarendon Hall on Thirteenth Street in Manhattan on May 14, 1882, and was a principal speaker at the picnic in Wendel's Elm Park in the afternoon following the parade on Tuesday morning, September 5, 1882. The parade ended about noon that day at Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue.<sup>1</sup>

Five state laws establishing Labor Day as a legal holiday had been passed by 1887. Grover Cleveland signed a bill in 1894 enacting the first Monday in September a legal holiday for employees of the federal government—thus making it a national institution.

## ORIGINS

P.J. McGuire was born in New York on July 6, 1852 to parents, both of whom were immigrants



from the Irish famine of the late 1840s. His mother, Catherine Hand O'Riley, emigrated in 1847 with two surviving children of the eight she had given birth to since her first marriage at age fifteen. Matthew O'Riley, her first husband, had died in Ireland. According to family tradition, Catherine Hand was said to be the niece of New York governor, DeWitt Clinton. That tradition also holds that, on the ship to America, she met bachelor John James McGuire whom she married in 1850. They settled in a tenement in the seventeenth ward on Manhattan's west side.<sup>2</sup>

The McGuire family grew to seven children with the birth of three more girls (Susan, Theresa and Kathryn) and one more son—John James, Jr. The heavy burden of support fell to John James, Sr. who was employed as a full-time porter for Lord & Taylor's department store. In 1885, P.J. McGuire described living conditions in the seventeenth ward before a congressional committee chaired by Senator Henry W. Blair of New Hampshire:

*Look at this city, with its long rows of tenement barracks, with its working people shrinking back into alleys and back lanes and huddled together in to deep cellars and basements. In the 17th ward of this city the average space of land occupied*

**Illustration:**  
*Memorial erected in 1952 in Arlington Cemetery (Pennsauken, N.J.) honors McGuire for his contributions to labor in the United States. Courtesy of L.A. O'Donnell.*

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*by each inhabitant is 9½ feet square—but little more than a living grave—filth, foul, air abounding, the sunshine of heaven denied them, crowded and packed together, such conditions have been more destructive to human life than even war itself and all its horrors. In these tenements of the city, 28,000 children are born every year, 10,000 die annually, and thousands are sent to prison, and yet the majority of these people have paid by way of rent enough to purchase for themselves, not only one house but several, and still after all this outlay they are at the cruel mercy of landlords, who on failure to pay the month's rent, will cast them out into the streets homeless and houseless.*

*By Mr. George: [Senator from Mississippi]*

*Q. Have you made any personal inspection?*

*A. Oh, yes. I was born in this city and I know the city thoroughly.*

*Q. I mean an inspection of what you have just described.*

*A. I speak from personal knowledge. I speak of the ward in which I was born and in which I have resided, except when I have been traveling.*

*By the Chairman:*

*Q. Which ward is that?*

*A. The seventeenth.<sup>3</sup>*

Scholarly studies of this area verify conditions described by McGuire. Frame tenements of four or five stories were common. Each floor accommodated four families—two rooms for each. Cooking, sleeping, washing and all else took place therein. Behind each tenement was a small yard with one outhouse for all tenants and clotheslines for the wash. Contagious diseases were a serious hazard in the seventeenth ward, as was alcoholism nurtured by proliferation of saloons. The contrast with elegant homes in nearby Stuyvesant Square was stunning — and bred resentment among tenement dwellers.<sup>4</sup>

#### EDUCATION

P.J. McGuire became a student in the parish school of St. John the Baptist Catholic Church at West Thirtieth Street. He remained there until March, 1863. At that time, at age ten, he was obliged to leave in order to help support the family—by now grown to seven children. His father had enlisted in the Union Army under the assumed name of a wealthy draftee in return for the amount of three hundred dollars.<sup>5</sup> The summer of 1863 saw riots over imposition of the draft as well as violence between Black Americans and Irish dockworkers. It was a fearful time for an eleven-year-old to be on the streets, but McGuire began selling newspapers there, was a stable boy, polished boots, swept shops and ran errands for Lord & Taylor where his father had worked.

On July 8, 1869 McGuire, aged seventeen, was accepted for a four-year apprenticeship in Haines Piano Shop in Manhattan at Twenty-first Street and Second Avenue. He was trained by skilled German woodworkers from whom he learned the German tongue and socialist ideology. His evenings were spent at the Cooper Union Free School where he first met Samuel Gompers, a recent emigrant cigar maker from London, only two years his senior. Participating in the Rising Star Debating Society at the school where both young men excelled, McGuire acquired a taste for left-leaning ideas. Together they also attended meetings of the International Workingmen's Association in the Tenth Ward

#### Illustration:

*Photograph of Peter J. McGuire taken when he close to age twenty in 1873.*

*During the same year a nation-wide financial panic occurred, McGuire was unemployed, and his interest in socialism grew stronger. Courtesy of L.A. O'Donnell.*

Hotel at Broome and Forsythe Streets. The IWA was dominated by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who moved its headquarters to New York from London to prevent it from coming under the control of Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin. A smaller group of ten including McGuire, Gompers and Joseph P. McDonnell (corresponding secretary of the New York Council of the IWA) stayed after the regular meeting to assess various forms of socialism, anarchism and related "isms." Of the ten only Gompers avoided membership in the IWA.

AGITATION

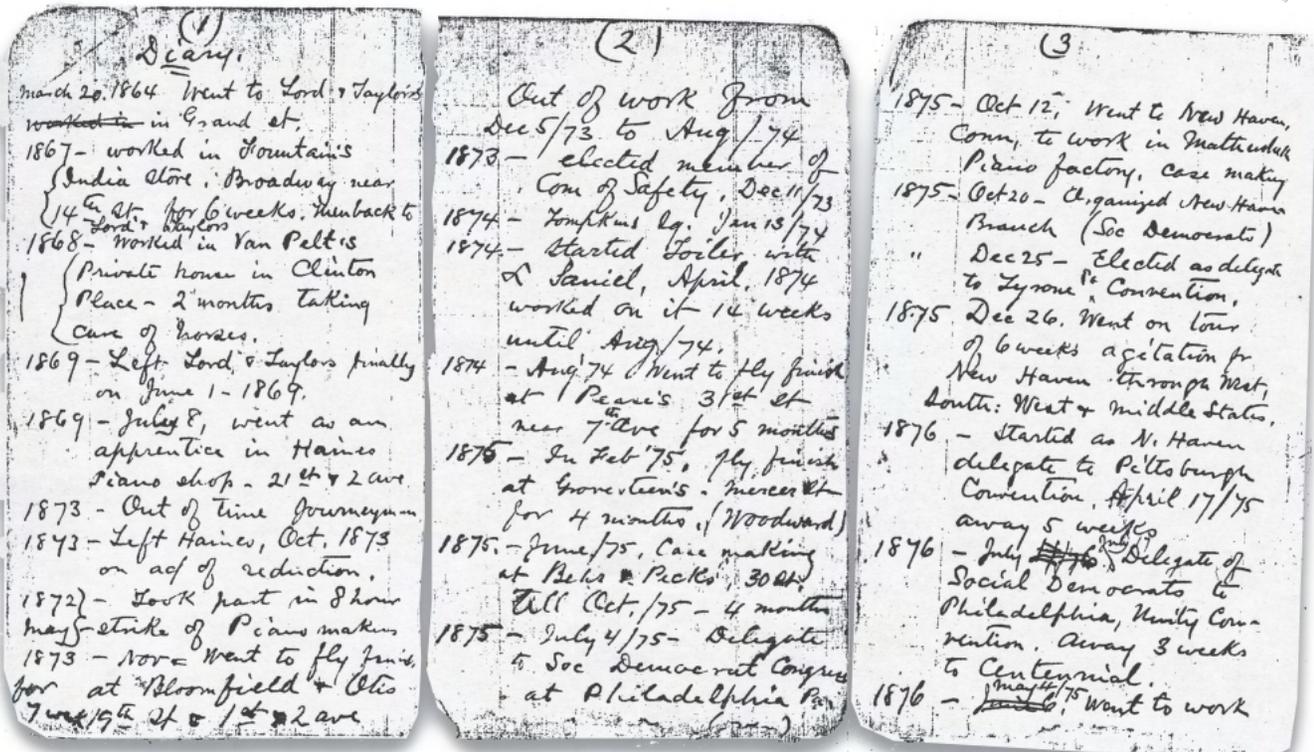
McGuire's appetite for socialism rose when the Panic of 1873 occurred shortly after his apprenticeship was completed. Bankruptcy of the Northern Pacific Railroad promoted by Jay Cooke set off a long-lasting recession. McGuire was without work for eight months. Widespread unemployment led to agitation. It was especially evident in the Cooper Union where a group calling itself the Committee of Public Safety was formed (inspired by a group of that name during the French Revolution). The young journeyman was elected to the committee and later became its chairman, undoubtedly because of his skills as a speaker and agitator.

The culmination of his efforts was to organize a rally in Tompkins Square Park between Seventh and Tenth Streets and Avenues A and C. It was scheduled for January 13, 1874. The police commissioner had reluctantly issued a permit for the gathering. But, unbeknownst to McGuire, the permit had been rescinded at the eleventh hour. Thousands converged at the park, milling about waiting for speeches to begin, but suddenly police arrived to disburse the crowd. Samuel Gompers recalled the experience:

*Shortly afterward mounted police charged the crowd on Eighth Street, riding them down and attacking men, women, and children without discrimination. It was an orgy of brutality. I was caught in the crowd on the street and barely saved my head from being cracked by jumping down a cellarway.<sup>6</sup>*

Prior to the Tompkins Square debacle, McGuire was saddened to learn that his father had twice denounced him—first before Police Commissioner Oliver Gardner on January 10—and again the next day on steps of the parish church. When the Commissioner confronted the young man with his father's words, he was reduced to tears—and anger. His father spoke of him as a communist, loafer, atheist and in other

**Illustration:**  
Excerpts from the diary written by P.J. McGuire highlight some of his activities from 1864 to 1876. Entries appear to have been made well after the activities took place. Courtesy of L.A. O'Donnell.



### THE NEW YORK DEMONSTRATION.

For ten years no such labor parade or picnic was ever held in this city as that of the Central Labor Union which took place on the 5th inst. Fully 10,000 men took part in the parade and over 20,000 on the grounds. In many shops the day was proclaimed a general holiday. All nationalities and trades mingled together in festive enjoyment and listened to speeches of encouragement from various workers in the cause. It is now suggested that the first Tuesday in September shall become the labor holiday of New York and be celebrated every year by a parade and picnic. It is also proposed that this day should be likewise observed throughout the country; that Labor by its own will should establish its own universal holiday—a day that would represent the new industrial era of peace which is coming through the fraternity of Labor, and which will commemorate no bloody battle fields, or sectional wars, but will be a Harvest festival of universal rejoicing for organized industry. The ruling classes have their Decoration Days and Thankgivings, why should not Labor declare its own legal holiday?

base terms. It is not clear what the elder McGuire's motives were, but it may have been a case of generational conflict between immigrant parents eager to conform — and impatience of their offspring with poverty alongside great wealth. In any case the rupture was temporary. Young McGuire continued to pursue social reform.<sup>7</sup>

### TRAVELS

The year 1875 marked the beginning of McGuire's seemingly endless travels. He embarked on a seven-year campaign for socialism of the LaSallean or politically-oriented, non-violent, non-Marxian type. Moving to New Haven in the fall of that year he campaigned all through New England for the cause of reform through political means. He estab-

lished sections for the movement in industrial communities and provided for his livelihood as a journeyman wood-joiner. New Haven was his base. A brief sample from his diary for 1877 records that from February 22 to March 18 he "went on an extended tour of New England." On March 23 he became "engaged in behalf of Wamsutta strikers in New Bedford, Mass. For 4 ½ weeks." On June 6 he "went to work in New Haven Folding Chair Company." On September 2, he "went to Cincinnati and engaged 6 weeks in local pol. campaign."<sup>8</sup>

During August, 1878 McGuire journeyed to Chicago and St. Louis and back, with numerous stops along the way preaching labor solidarity. His method did not exclude hopping a freight train, walking or using passenger coaches on rare occasions when he could afford it. His diary records meeting Maggie Richardson from New York state, a young woman two years his senior. She was down on her luck and had a five-year-old daughter, Sadie. Out of compassion he married her and took his new family to live in St. Louis in October of 1878.

His four years in St. Louis saw him embrace trade unionism, labor-reform legislation and, in between, carpentry work to support his family.

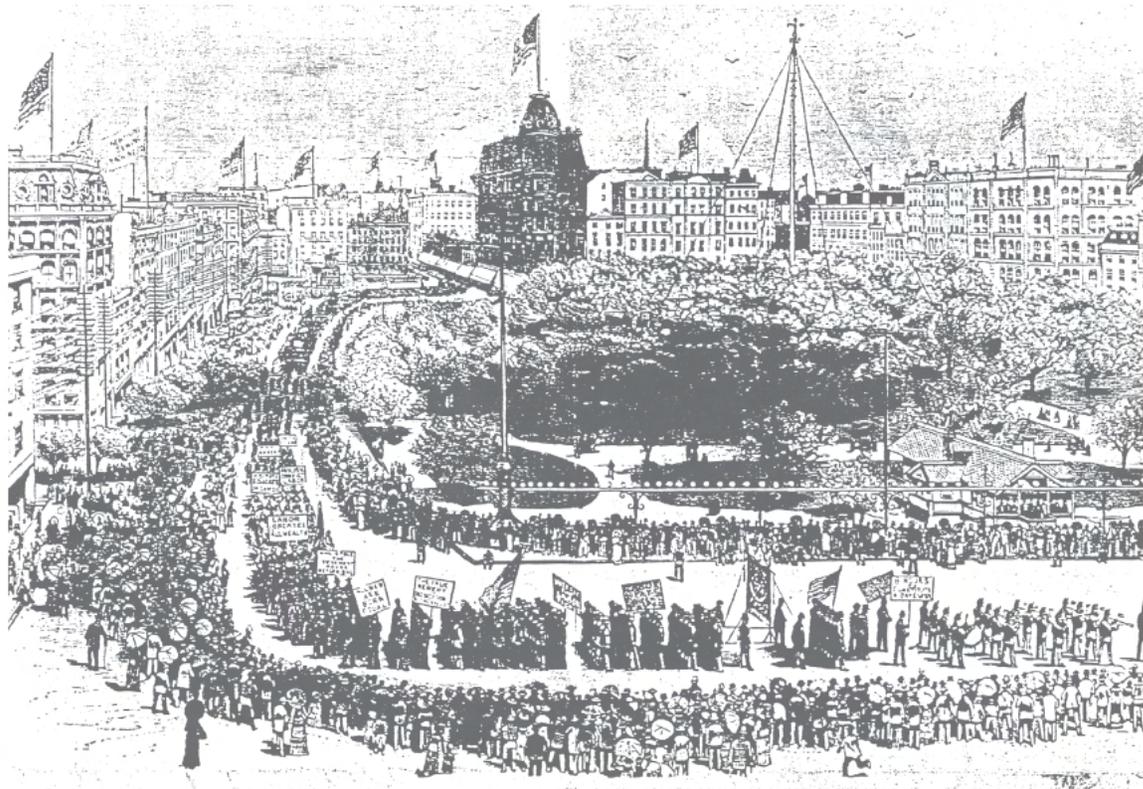
### Illustrations:

(top) Excerpt from The Carpenter describes the labor parade and picnic held on September 5, 1882. Here, McGuire suggests that the first Tuesday in September "shall become the labor holiday of New York...."

Why Tuesday was selected is not clear.

(right) Selection from nineteenth-century print illustrates part of the labor parade held in September, 1882.

Original caption describes the event as the first Labor Day parade. Both illustrations courtesy of L.A. O'Donnell.



As a representative of the St. Louis Trade and Labor Assembly, where his command of German and leadership skills were welcomed, he successfully lobbied the state legislature for labor-reform laws. In 1879 at Jefferson City a law creating the Missouri Bureau of Labor Statistics was enacted, thanks to McGuire. Following that laws were passed restricting child labor, safeguarding employees from competition of prison labor, and a statute requiring ventilation of mines—largely through his efforts. Recognition of his ability led to his appointment as deputy commissioner of the Bureau, but his activist personality clashed with a career as a bureaucrat, and he left after six months. Needless to point out, there were numerous side trips during the St. Louis period for speeches, conferences, and conventions—including one to the International Socialist Congress in Coire, Switzerland, held in early October after which he “visited [areas in] Switzerland, Italy, Germany, France & England & returned Nov 3 —1881.”<sup>9</sup>

Prior to leaving for Europe several St. Louis unionists led by McGuire framed a call for a national federation of all organized trades. Terre Haute, Indiana was the site of the meeting which they attended as delegates from the St. Louis Trades Assembly and proposed the plan. The result was a conference of trade union officials at Pittsburgh in November which established the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (FOTLU). McGuire was not present. The FOTLU proved to be impotent. Nevertheless, it was the forerunner of the American Federation of Labor, founded four years later.

#### NATIONAL UNION

*The Carpenter*, a monthly paper first appeared in May of 1881. It was conceived by McGuire, aided by his associate August Overbeck who wrote columns in German. McGuire, editor and publisher, prepared those in English. An evaluation of *The Carpenter* was published in the *New York Sun* on March 30, 1887. The review of it in the *Sun* was quite favorable and included the following comments:

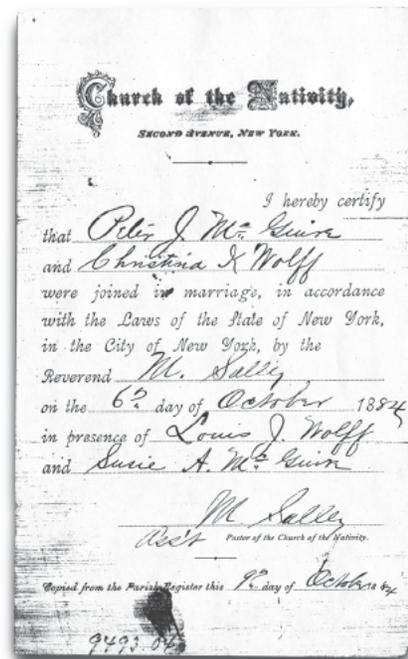
*Next in the editorial page, an aggregation of pertinent, sensible, practical paragraphs and articles calling forth by occurrences in the country or the*

*Brotherhood. It is a peculiarity of this little journal that every line that is written for it is distinguished for the simplicity, directness and good taste of the language used. In this respect the Carpenter could be read with profit in the offices of some of the most prosperous newspapers even in New York.*<sup>10</sup>

Publication of it continues to this day. It was conceived as an instrument to publicize launching a national union in the trade, which McGuire and socialist comrade Gustav Luebker hoped to create. Forming a planning committee, they contacted sixty-two local carpenter unions inviting delegates for a convention on August 8, 1881 in Chicago. Thirty-five delegates from fifteen cities appeared in Chicago. They accounted for approximately 4,800 carpenters. Today the union has slightly more than half a million members. Its complete title is United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America. It is commonly referred to as the Brotherhood.

The 1881 convention elected McGuire general secretary of the union. As its only full-time officer he was provided with a salary of fifteen dollars per week. Gabriel Edmonston of Washington, D.C. became its first president. McGuire’s innumerable responsibilities as editor-journalist, correspondent, and traveling organizer were heavy indeed, but his dedication was equal to the burden. In late November, 1881 McGuire moved his office to New York City where it was located at 184 William Street.

In the same period he persevered through the several years of serious illness and hospitalization of his first wife. She died on January 26, 1884. McGuire, heavy hearted, nevertheless carried on and married again on October 16, 1884. In New York’s Church of the Nativity, he wed



**Illustration:** Certificate of marriage between McGuire and his second wife, “Teenie” Wolff. They were married in Manhattan in October, 1884, and had three daughters and one son. Courtesy of L.A. O’Donnell.

Christina Iris Wolff, a woman thirteen years his junior. A Lutheran from Staten Island, she patiently stood by him, bore him three daughters (Lillian, Kathryn, Myrtle) and one son, P.J. Jr., who became a Tammany Hall politico. She also raised Sadie, then aged twelve, his stepdaughter by the first marriage. “Teenie” Wolff was to survive McGuire by thirteen years.<sup>11</sup>

#### AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR

The AFL, established on December 8, 1886, soon demonstrated effectiveness that its predecessor lacked. To a significant degree this was due to the active participation of McGuire who was its secretary for the first few critical years. He was in his mid-thirties, and his experience, leadership, intelligence and judgment provided to the new union needed direction, of which he gave unsparingly. This he did in addition to the heavy burden already demanded by his post as full-time secretary of the carpenters union. His old friend, Samuel Gompers, president of the AFL, relied heavily on McGuire’s advice and support.

By the late 1890s the AFL had become a going concern, and the carpenters union had recovered membership lost due to the recession of that decade. The Brotherhood became one of the largest unions in the nation. Due to the excessive obligations he had undertaken, McGuire’s health had suffered. He, therefore, resigned from his position as AFL secretary and later left the post of first vice president.

For Peter J. McGuire, trade unionism was not the ultimate goal. He clung tenaciously to the ideal of a democratic, worker-controlled commonwealth which could replace capitalism. However, he recognized that it could not be realized until organization of workers was almost universal. One may speculate that he became aware it would not be achieved in his lifetime. In a letter to Gabriel Edmonston dated September 15, 1883 he said, “socialism is my faith, my religious ideal...”<sup>12</sup>

#### LAST YEARS

As frequently as McGuire traveled and as often as he gave speeches, it is not surprising that his health was affected. The effects became obvious in the 1890s. In spring 1891, he developed pneumonia after settling a strike in Indianapolis. The following December he was ill with flu. In March 1894, he

came down with flu and catarrh. By December he was again afflicted by catarrh and then “La Grippe.”<sup>13</sup> His illnesses began to affect his ability to handle correspondence, bookkeeping and *The Carpenter*, for all of which he was responsible.

By the turn of the century he was aged forty-eight, and his health was seriously deteriorating. He was unwilling to encourage younger men to whom he could delegate responsibility or to cultivate a successor for himself. In short, McGuire had a proprietary view of the Brotherhood. The upshot was a revolt led by two executive board members of the Brotherhood, Frank Duffy and William Huber—clearly “business unionists” lacking anything like the idealism of McGuire. They conspired with an anti-union lawyer to indict McGuire for embezzling union funds.

It is impossible to believe that McGuire intentionally used treasury funds for his own gratification. On the other hand, his failing health—he now had severe rheumatism and liver disease caused by alcohol—might have led to his borrowing union funds to pay medical expenses, for which he intended to repay the union when he recovered.

Finally, after being suspended as general secretary, an out-of-court settlement was arranged whereby he repaid the Brotherhood by an amount of \$1,000. His last appearance took place at the 1902 convention in Atlanta where he hoped to defend himself. It was very sad. He was unable to stand upright. His formerly powerful voice was barely audible. He denied the charges and resigned from the Brotherhood he had created.<sup>14</sup>

In a modest house at 204 Byron Street in Camden, New Jersey the founder of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters joined his eighteen-year-old daughter Kathryn at the kitchen table for a game of hands. It was a cold winter evening in February 1906. The house was not heated sufficiently for lack of money to buy enough coal. Peter James McGuire, now aged fifty-three, suddenly collapsed and lingered in a semi-comatose state. He mumbled incoherently about carpenter unions out west for three days. On February 18, 1906 he died. The poverty of his last years was not unusual for individuals who espoused the cause of trade unions in those early times.

## POSTSCRIPT

Although the office of the Brotherhood moved from St. Louis to several other locations, in 1886 it moved to Philadelphia where it remained while McGuire was general secretary. McGuire and his family settled in Camden, New Jersey just across the Delaware River. McGuire commuted to his office on the Vine Street ferry—when not engaged in one of his innumerable trips. Upon his death, therefore, he was buried in the Roman Catholic Calvary Cemetery in Camden. The poverty of the family prevented purchase even of a suitable grave marker.

When his widow inquired about reserving a plot next to that of her husband, an officious cleric named Bernard Mulligan informed her that she was prohibited from burial there since she was Lutheran and, therefore, could not be buried in consecrated ground. He said he would mark her husband's grave with a teacup. In April 1886, Father Mulligan released McGuire's remains. As the Brotherhood recognized its obligation to the widow of its founder, she could afford to move McGuire's remains to the Arlington Cemetery in Pennsauken, New Jersey. There she could reserve a plot for herself next to his. The union also provided funds for a larger home for the family.<sup>15</sup>

In 1948, realizing the great work of McGuire, the AFL Central Labor Union of Camden and vicinity introduced a resolution at the AFL convention, calling for a memorial for P.J. McGuire. The resolution was accepted. The monument was completed in 1952 at his gravesite and dedicated in the same year. It consists of a large statue of McGuire on a pedestal with a background of eight marble pillars in curved alignment. Labor Day celebrations are held there annually.<sup>16</sup>

## Notes

- 1 *The Carpenter*, September 1897, p. 8; November 15, 1890, p. 2. In the latter issue McGuire recalls a Matthew Maguire also advocating the proposal at the Central Labor Union meeting. In his history of the carpenters union, labor historian Walter Galenson concludes: "If an arbitrator were called in to adjudicate the matter, he would have to find that Peter J. McGuire was the father of Labor Day." See Galenson, *The United Brotherhood of Carpenters*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1983, p. 34.
- 2 Interview with Mrs. Iris Rossell, granddaughter of P.J. McGuire, Collingswood, New Jersey, November 17, 1988.
- 3 Testimony of Peter J. McGuire. U.S. Congress. Senate Report on hearing upon Relations between Labor and Capital. Washington. D.C., 1885. pp. 443–444. (Senate Report no. 1262. Forty-eighth Congress. Second Session).
- 4 Jay P. Dolan. *The Immigrant Church* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press. 1975). pp. 27–44; Robert Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City, 1825–1863* (Port Washington. New York. I.J. Friedman, 1949), pp. 48–54.
- 5 Mrs. Iris Rossell, op. cit.
- 6 Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor* (New York, E.P. Dutton, 1925), vol. I, p. 96.
- 7 Ibid., pp. 92–93; David Lyon, "The World of P.J. McGuire" (Ph.D. dissertation. University of Minnesota, 1972), pp. 30–31.
- 8 Diary of P.J. McGuire, p.4. This diary (handwritten) was in possession of Mrs. Iris Rossell. Entries are very brief and appear to have been written well after the events occurred.
- 9 Diary. p. 11.
- 10 Review of *The Carpenter* in the *New York Sun* reprinted in *The Carpenter*, May 1887, p.2.
- 11 Galenson, op. cit. pp.27–28. Lyon, op. cit. pp. 156–157; photocopy of a letter from McGuire's daughter Kathryn to Mr. E.C. Killeen (undated) obtained from Mrs. Iris Rossell; McGuire was on a trip to Halifax, Nova Scotia when his wife died. He returned two days after her death; *The Carpenter*, February 1884, p. 1.
- 12 The letter was handwritten with the salutation, "Dear Old Fellow:".
- 13 *The Carpenter*. May 1891. p. 2; January 1892, p. 2; April 1894, p. 1; February 1895, p.1.
- 14 Galenson, op. cit. pp. 89–93.
- 15 Interview with Mrs. Iris Rossell, Collingswood, New Jersey, June 15, 1989.
- 16 Ibid.; (See photograph by author.)